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For Vouchers, A Mixed Report Card

Milwaukee Program Spawns Qualms Amid Successes

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MILWAUKEE -- The school day was almost over, but before the students were excused, fifth-grader Larry Williams had a very public confession to make.

"I would like to apologize to Miss Guenther for chewing gum in her class," he told teachers and fellow students at St. Marcus Lutheran School, a showcase for Milwaukee's voucher program, the nation's first and most extensive experiment in publicly funded private education. The other 250 pupils gathered in the school cafeteria applauded, then joined hands with their teachers and recited the Lord's Prayer.

A mixture of Christian revival meeting and mass indoctrination session, "Sacred Circle" is an important part of the daily routine at St. Marcus, one of 100 or so private schools that participate in Milwaukee's \$67 million voucher program.

Even though the vast majority of students at St. Marcus are black neighborhood children from single-parent families who had never set foot in a Lutheran church, they were quick to adapt to the school's strict, no-excuses approach and pervasive emphasis on religion.

St. Marcus offers a glimpse of what could lie in store for Washington if Congress passes legislation approving a voucher program for the nation's capital. A bill authorizing private tuition grants of as much as \$7,500 for 1,300 low-income families cleared the House by one vote this month; the Senate may take up a similar bill today.

In Milwaukee, as in the District, the debate over school choice has proved divisive, pitting longtime allies against each other and bringing together some strange ideological bedfellows.

Thirteen years after the Milwaukee voucher experiment began, there is widespread disagreement over whether the introduction of competition has wrought the educational "revolution" that some supporters predicted. But there is general acknowledgement that voucher schools vary as widely in quality as do public schools.

"There are good voucher schools and there are poor voucher schools, just as there are good public schools and poor public schools," said Anneliese Dickman, a senior researcher at the Public Policy Forum, a nonpartisan educational think tank in Milwaukee.

At one end of the spectrum is a school such as St. Marcus, which offers a highly regarded, traditional education and has just undergone a \$5 million renovation, the result of private fundraising.

At the opposite end are such institutions as Alex's Academics of Excellence, which was founded by a convicted rapist fired from the public school system in 1991 after being accused of "inappropriate behavior" with female students. The school's former principal recently told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel that he saw employees smoke marijuana at school, an allegation denied by the school's lawyer.

Wisconsin education officials say they have little control over Alex's Academics because it is a private school, even though it has received \$2.8 million in taxpayers' funds over the years.

"It's easier to start a school legally in Milwaukee and get money for it from the state than it is to open a bar or a gas station," said Bob Peterson, a Milwaukee public school teacher and prominent critic of vouchers.

School choice advocates say the free market will eventually force bad schools out of business. They note that 49 pupils signed up for Alex's Academics this year -- down from 175 last year -- while St. Marcus has expanded from 110 to 250 students over the past two years.

So far, it is unclear whether students learn more in voucher schools than in public schools. "There is evidence both ways," Dickman said.

One problem is a lack of data. Because the state does not require private school students to take the same standardized tests as their public school counterparts, it is difficult to compare performance.

The fact that poor minority families are willing to take their children out of public schools and put them in a school such as Alex's Academics illustrates "just how desperate" many of them are, said Tony Higgins, a single African American parent who educated his two children at voucher schools. He noted that the high school graduation rate for black students in Milwaukee is one of the lowest in the nation, around 34 percent.

To qualify for the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, families must earn less than 175 percent of the federal poverty level. That makes them eligible for tuition vouchers worth up to \$5,882 a year, which are paid by the state to the school of their choice. A total of 11,163 students participated last year, compared with 89,000 attending traditional public schools. Seven out of 10 voucher schools are religious, either Catholic or Lutheran.

Situated on the north side of Milwaukee, in a once-genteel neighborhood that is now home to liquor stores, prostitutes and crack dealers, St. Marcus Lutheran School was founded in 1875 by German immigrants. But white parishioners long since moved to the suburbs, leaving the school catering largely to African American families dissatisfied with the Milwaukee public schools.

"I became a Lutheran so I wouldn't have to pay the high tuition fees," admitted Jessie Mae Jones, who was brought up in Mississippi as a Southern Baptist and arrived in Milwaukee in the 1950s.

Known to everyone as "Miss Jessie," Jones has been foster mother to 17 children. As a concession to parishioners like Jones, who was unmoved by the austere German hymns, St. Marcus Church has made gospel singing a part of Sunday services.

When St. Marcus began accepting voucher students in 1999, black parents lined up to send their children to the school, and it expanded rapidly. Many parents say it is safer and more disciplined than the local public schools, and offers a more rigorous education. Unlike most public schools, St. Marcus requires students to wear a uniform of blue pants or skirt, blue blazer, white shirt and red tie.

Along with religion, discipline is omnipresent at St. Marcus. Students are reprimanded for even minor infractions, such as talking in the hallway, while a more serious offense such as arguing with a teacher can lead to suspension. Students are required to march in silence from one classroom to another in the narrow yellow lines on the side of the corridor, under the eagle eye of their teachers.

"We take a Rudy Giuliani approach to education," said Kole Knueppel, the St. Marcus principal. "By taking care of the small things, we hope the big things will take care of themselves. The notion of fighting or bringing drugs to school is virtually unheard of here."

One student, recently transferred from a neighborhood public school, was sent to the principal's office for rolling her eyes at her teacher. The confrontation escalated after Knueppel told her to copy lines from a poetry book, and she called him "the dumbest principal I ever had." Left by herself in his office for two days, she was soon pleading to be allowed to rejoin her classmates.

The payoff, Knueppel and teachers say, is a much calmer classroom environment. Instead of struggling to keep order, teachers can focus on teaching. They look forward to taking children on expeditions to places such as Wyoming and Arizona. Teachers spend hours after class providing one-on-one tutoring to students.

There is a lively debate in Milwaukee over whether the voucher program has put pressure on public schools to be more responsive. Advocates point to the growth of charter schools, which are part of the public school system but offer specialized types of education. They say the teachers union has been forced to accept reforms -- including relaxing the once-sacrosanct seniority rule governing new hires -- in order to compete with private schools.

"We have got to do more public relations, to show parents what we have to offer," acknowledged Deborah Bell, principal of Milwaukee Education Center, a local public school that has lost students to St. Marcus. But she rejects the notion that voucher schools have changed her educational philosophy.

Bell said she may have to accept as much as \$100,000 in cuts this year because of lower enrollment. This could mean losing a teacher or a couple of teacher's aides, a painful prospect.

Spending on Milwaukee public schools has increased substantially over the last decade, from around \$6,000 per student to more than \$10,000, despite fears that the voucher program would drain funds from the system. In fact, statistics suggest, most of the money spent on voucher schools is new, raised from local property taxes or allocated by the state.

As in Washington, where Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D) has joined forces with conservative Republicans to push for school choice, Milwaukee's voucher experiment has spawned an eclectic coalition of supporters. The original legislation was the result of an alliance between then-Gov. Tommy G. Thompson (R), who is white, and an African American Democratic state representative, Polly Williams, who had served as Jesse Jackson's local campaign manager.

"School choice is the only issue we can agree on," said former Milwaukee school superintendent Howard Fuller, a prominent voucher supporter and one-time follower of Malcolm X.

The debate has largely moved from whether the voucher program should exist to whether it should be extended, and how to protect against abuses. Voucher opponents, and even some supporters, complain about a lack of basic information.

"There is no real accountability," complained Robert Lehmann, president of the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association, the local teachers union. "The voucher schools are not held to the same standards as public schools, even though they receive public money."

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